DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 369 529 PS 022 272

TITLE	Early Childhood Development: The Challenge and the Opportunity.
INSTITUTION	United Nations Children's Fund, New York, N.Y.
PUB DATE	Mar 93
NOTE	17p.; The material contained in this booklet is adapted from UNICEF's "Towards a Comprehensive Strategy for the Development of the Young Child."
AVAILABLE FROM	UNICEF, 3 United Nations Plaza, New York, NY 10017.
PUB TYPE	Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Child Development; Child Health; Child Welfare; Cognitive Development; Definitions; *Developing Nations; *Early Childhood Education; *Educational Strategies; Foreign Countries; International Programs; *Program Implementation; Public Policy; *Young Children
IDENTIFIERS	*UNICEF

ABSTRACT

This booklet discusses the opportunities and challenges for improving the educational opportunities of young children in the developing world in light of recent political and economic changes, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the World Conference on Education for All (1990), and the World Summit for Children (1990). After defining child development, child care, and early childhood development programs, the importance of learning in the early years is examined. Young children learn by constructing knowledge, social interaction, exploration, inquiry, and play. Effective programming approaches must: (1) educate caregivers (2) promote community development; (3) deliver a service; (4) strengthen national resources and capabilities; (5) strengthen demand and awareness; (6) develop national child care and family policies; and (7) develop supportive legal and regulatory frameworks. The health, social, emotional, and educational benefits of early childhood development programs are also examined. The booklet ends with a call to action to proceed toward an enlightened program of child survival and development. (MDM)

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Early Childhood Development
The Challenge & The Opportunity

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An Opportunity

The neglected subject of early childhood development is receiving greater attention as a result of changing global trends and challenges. Throughout the developing world current trends of urbanisation, industrialisation, and migration combined with expanded access to education services have brought about major social transformations. Families are shifting from traditional extended forms of social organisation to more nuclear or female-headed households. These changes have also urged women to abandon traditional work patterns in subsistence agriculture and household management to new forms of employment in export-promotion zones and piecework occupations. All these trends have altered child care patterns and practices that have for generations provided families with culturally appropriate solutions.

The child care dilemma has additional significance when we look at the scientific evidence accumulated during the past decade that powerfully demonstrates the importance of the early years of the child's life and the high developmental costs of inadequate care. The quality of care and interaction provided to a child—that enhance his or her social, psychological, and cognitive development—has a direct, measurable impact on the child's health and nutritional status as well. Long-term costs of inadequate child care and children's frequent exposure to illness, poor nutrition, family stress, non-stimulating environments, and other risk factors in the early years can later be measured in terms of school drop-out, unemployment and delinquency rates, and the inter-generational perpetuation of failure and poverty. Thus, early childhood is a time of opportunity in which even small positive changes can generate long-term social benefits.

First Call for Children

Over the past few years, international donors as well as a considerable number of countries in Latin America, Asia, the Middle East, and parts of Africa have shifted their positions with respect to programming for the care of young children and their development. This shift — which is also a reflection of major global transformations, such as the end of the cold war and reduction of military expenditures—is summarised by three international events that focused the world's attention on the young child including, the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, the *World Conference on Education for All*, and the *World Summit for Children*.

The *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989) — currently ratified by 127 countries — promotes the value of the family, the principles of joint and shared parental responsibilities, and the defense of children's rights within a context of gender equality. Focusing on the principle that "learning begins at birth", the *World Conference on Education for All* (1990) emphasized the need to expand early childhood and development programmes, including family and community interventions especially for poor, disadvantaged, and disabled children. Finally, the *World Summit for Children* (1990) synthesized the principles and the concerns, and urged the world's societies to work for children's enhanced development and education. These three important events provide an extraordinary opportunity for the donor community to reflect, review, and reconsider their strategies towards a first call for children.

What Do We Mean By Early Childhood Development?

Child development is not the same as growth. While growth is described by changes in size, development is characterized by changes in complexity and function. Child development encompasses the unfolding of behaviours from immature to mature; patterns of behaviour that expand from simple to complex; and the evolution of a child from dependency to autonomous adulthood. More simply, child development is a process of change in which the child learns to handle more complex levels of moving, thinking, feeling, and interacting with people and objects in the environment. For a child to develop in a healthy and normal way, it is necessary that his or her basic needs of protection, food, and health care be met along with basic needs for affection, interaction and stimulation, and learning through exploration and discovery.

Child care is defined as the set of behaviours that supports a child's development, including, for example, breastfeeding and feeding, providing shelter and supervision, and preventing and attending to illness, as well as engaging the child in social interaction, and providing a stimulating and safe environment for play and exploration. Recent research has highlighted that the quality of care characterized by the motivation, skill, physical capacity, consistency, and responsiveness of the caregiver is strongly linked to child survival and development outcomes.

The term **early childhood development programme** is used to describe a range of services that promote those conditions of care, socialisation, and education in the home or community that enhance a child's total development. Such services, provided for a certain number of hours during the day and in a safe environment, contribute to children's full development by complementing the family environment and the formal education system. The type of programmes best suited to this purpose will vary according to the age-group concerned and the comprehensiveness of services provided, including health, nutrition, and developmentally appropriate learning contexts. How a child's developmental needs can and should be satisfied will vary according to the particular characteristics of his or her environment.

In this perspective, early childhood development programmes include both "child care" and "child education" initiatives. Although the need exists for providing and expanding child care and /or early education, there is a growing consensus among researchers and practitioners that child care and early education are inseparable issues and must be considered as one. For example, good child care involves developmental and socialisation experience, cognitive stimulation, and physical care. Children cannot be well cared for without their being educated, and children cannot be well educated without their being cared for. The goal of policies should be to eliminate the divisions between early childhood education and child care and to identify and expand the best qualities of each.

Importance of Learning in the Early Years

There is increased recognition of the social consequences of neglecting development throughout childhood and the major qualitative improvements needed in primary schooling and parental education. This perspective is strengthened by an increasing recognition of the need to ensure the sustainability of recent gains in child survival by empowering parents with knowledge and skills about child survival and development.

The first two years are characterized by rapid growth and some of life's most significant learning experiences, including walking and talking, encountering fear and pleasure, and discovering oneself and others. In supportive physical, emotional, and social environments, the development of critical brain structures supports the increasingly complex behavioural skills that enhance the child's abilities to learn from and shape its interactions with caregivers and the environment. Programmes for children in this age-group must protect their physical integrity and provide them with the diet needed for their growth. They must also promote their psychological, social, and emotional development and intellectual curiosity in a climate of affection and security.

The period between the ages of three and six is also one of rapid physical and mental development. Children gain confidence in their bodies, strive for independence by doing things on their own, and experiment with objects in the surrounding environment. They show a livelier curiosity at what is going on about them, enjoy the company of other children, and seek to imitate adult behaviour. They learn to assert themselves as individuals and begin to acquire self-control and discipline. During this period, children's intellectual and social development proceed apace, as illustrated by their acquiring sophisticated language skills and adopting culturally acceptable behaviours. While the health needs of children in this age-group still require constant attention, it is essential that they be provided with challenges that respond to their enormous thirst for learning and be prepared for symbolic and logical thinking required in formal schooling. Some of the basic principles characterizing how young children learn include:

Children construct knowledge From infancy, children are mentally and physically active, struggling to make sense of the world. Children construct their own knowledge or "working models" through repeated interactions with people and materials. Throughout childhood, these mental constructions are continually reshaped, expanded, and reorganized by new experiences.

Children learn through social interaction with adults and other children The development of higher-order mental functions, such as conceptualisation, begins in social interaction and then is internalized psychologically. The principle of learning is that children can do things first in a supportive context and then later independently and in a variety of contexts. The support of adults and more competent peers provides the necessary assistance or "scaffold" that enables the child to move to the next level of independent functioning.

Importance of Learning in the Early Years *(continued)*

Children's learning reflects a recurring cycle that begins in awareness, and moves to exploration, to inquiry, and finally, to utilisation Any new learning by children begins with awareness, which is generated from their experiences with objects, events, or people. In the next step in the cycle, if children are to really know about and understand something, they must explore, using whatever means possible, usually employing the various senses. Through inquiry, children analyse and compare their own behaviors or concepts to what is observed in society and make closer approximations to the conventional patterns of the culture. The final aspect of the cycle of learning is utilisation, where children are able to use what they have learnt for multiple purposes and apply their learning to new situations.

Children learn through play. Children's spontaneous play provides opportunities for exploration, experimentation, and manipulation that are essential for constructing knowledge. Play contributes to the development of representational thought. A child expresses and represents his or her ideas, thoughts, and feelings when engaged in symbolic play. During play a child learns to deal with feelings, to interact with others, to resolve conflicts, and to gain a sense of competence. Perhaps most important, it is through play that children develop their imaginations and creativity.

Children's interests and "need to know" motivate learning. Children have an inherent need or "inner push" to exercise their emerging mental abilities and to make sense of their experiences. Parents and teachers need to identify content that intrigues children and arouses in them a need and desire to figure something out. In short, caregivers and teachers create awareness and foster interest in children by planning the environments and introducing new and stimulating objects, people, and experiences.

Child development and learning are characterized by individual variation. Each child has an individual pattern and timing of growth and development as well as individual styles of learning. Children's personal family experiences and cultural backgrounds also vary. Recognition that individual variation is not only normal but valuable requires that decisions about programmes and assessment be as individualized as possible.

Learning environments that incorporate these principles enable a child to develop a positive concept of self and seek, establish and maintain supportive relationships that continue to produce successful outcomes. The cycle of success can be as perpetuating as the cycle of failure. Access to adequate environments that are capable of responding and enhancing these basic universal needs is indeed the right of all children.

Principles for Action

Policy must be based on a set of guiding principles regarding children's basic needs, parents' roles and responsibilities and society's obligations. Failure to articulate values conveys mixed messages and results in negative practices with the potential to harm children and weaken families. An absence of principles for action constrains one's ability to measure success and understand failures. Accordingly, the following principles, which support and complement those put forth in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, must form the foundation for continued action to improve the lives of children and their families. These basic principles must form the cornerstone of an early childhood development programming strategy.

- Every child should have the opportunity to develop his or her full potential. Cultural diversity is a great resource that must be respected and preserved while ensuring that all children have an equal opportunity to enter the social and economic mainstream.
- The family is and should remain the primary institution for supporting the growth and development of children.
- Parents bear the primary responsibility for meeting their children's physical, emotional, and intellectual needs and for providing moral guidance and direction.
- Parents must be supported in their child-rearing roles, to enable them to fulfill their obligation, and to hold them responsible for the care and support of their children.
- Society has a legitimate and moral obligation to intervene whenever parents who fail to meet their responsibilities place their children at risk.
- Communities have a responsibility to provide safe, secure environments for families with children.
- Community institutions—schools, religious organisations, health and service organisations, NGOs and employers—have an important role in creating an environment that is supportive of parents and children.
- Prevention is the most effective and cost-effective way to address the needs of troubled families and vulnerable children.
- To address the needs of children and families, a significant and sustained commitment of time, leadership, and financial resources is required.

A Range of Programming Approaches

Programme experience has grown appreciably in recent years, providing a wide range of examples and insights to be drawn upon in future programming efforts. In an attempt to counter the narrow, "institutional", often expensive, and age-restricted image associated with preschool programmes, a typology of seven complementary programme approaches to early childhood development has been developed. Although all of these approaches are intended to enhance early child development, each has different immediate objectives and is directed towards a different audience or group of participants.

Educating caregivers. This approach is intended to educate and empower parents, other members of the family and alternative caregivers in ways that improve their care and interaction with the child and enrich the immediate environment where she or he grows up.

Promoting community development. This strategy stresses community initiatives, organisations, and participation in a range of interrelated activities to improve the physical environment, the knowledge and practices of community members, and the organisational base. It allows common action and improves the base for political and social negotiations. Although not necessarily focused on the needs of children, this approach has proven to be a useful strategy to which early childhood development initiatives can be linked.

Delivering a service. The overall goal of this direct approach is to enhance child development by attending to the immediate needs of children in centres organized outside the home. These are, in a sense, substitute or alternative environments to the home.

Strengthening national resources and capacities. The institutions responsible for implementing programmes require financial, material, and human resources with a capacity for the planning, organisation, and implementation of innovative techniques and models.

Strengthening demand and awareness. This programme approach concentrates on the production and distribution of knowledge in order to create awareness and demand. It may function at the level of policy makers and planners, or it can be directed to the general public by changing the cultural environment that affects children's development.

Developing national child care and family policies. Family policies supportive of women and children can include providing parents with increased time to meet their child-rearing and child-care responsibilities, taking measures to encourage increased possibilities for child care by grandparents or other adult family members, and providing parents with cash benefits or tax credits to assist them in meeting the costs of child rearing and child care.

Develop supportive legal and regulatory frameworks. A potentially critical strategy is to develop supportive legal frameworks to increase awareness of rights and legal resources among both women and children and to move towards more effective use of legislation and improved compliance.

Early Childhood Development Programmes Complementary Strategies

Programme Approach	*Objectives*	*Models*	*Participants/ Beneficiaries*
Educate caregivers	• Create awareness • Change attitudes • Improve/change practices	• Home visiting • Parental education • Child-to-child programmes	• Parents, family • Sibling(s) • Public
Promote community development	• Create awareness • Mobilise for action • Change conditions	• Technical mobilisation • Social mobilisation	• Community • Leaders • Promoters
Deliver a service	• Survival • Comprehensive development • Socialisation • Rehabilitation • Improvement of child care	• Home day care • Integrated child development centres • "Add-on" centres • Preschools (formal/non-formal)	• The child 0-2 years 3-6 years 0-6 years
Strenghten national resources and capabilities	• Create awareness • Improve skills • Increase material	• Training • Experimental, demonstration projects • Strengthening infrastructure • Action Research	• Programme personnel • Professionals and paraprofessionals
Strengthen demand and awareness	• Create awareness • Build political will • Increase demand • Change attitudes	• Social marketing • Ethos creation • Knowledge dissemination	• Policy makers • Public • Professionals
Develop national child care and family policies	• Encourage family-sensitive employment and social service delivery systems	• Innovative joint public/private arrangements • Tax incentives for formal/quasi-formal private enterprises	• Families with young children
Develop supportive legal and regulatory frameworks	• Increase awareness of rights and legal resources • Increase use of ILO legislation • Increase monitoring and compliance of international conventions	• Workplace • Day-care facilities • Protective environmental standards • Maternal leave and benefits • Support breastfeeding for working mothers • Family legislation	• Law-makers • Regulatory agencies • Women's groups and alliances

Three sets of considerations are helpful in overcoming the piecemeal approach that has unfortunately dominated policy guidelines in the past. The first set is represented by the seven complementary approaches outlined above. A second set of considerations indicates that comprehensive programmes should be participatory and community-based, adapted to different socio-cultural contexts, responsive to local child care and rearing patterns, financially feasible and cost-effective, and capable of reaching the largest possible number of at-risk children.

Finally, the third set of considerations relates to a programme's ability to target specific age-groups with developmentally appropriate interventions.

As these programme approaches indicate, those concerned with the survival and development of children face the difficult but challenging task of recovering the holistic view of child development that has been eroded by technological specialisation. This broad and integrative view is essential, not only in concept, but in the design and implementation of programmes. Collaboration between existing bureaucratic structures, each established for a specific purpose, is not an easy task. Organisational models such as placing coordination outside specialised agencies, creating inter-organisational activities, and building interdisciplinary networks will help to foster and sustain integrated programming approaches. Specific opportunities for programmatic linkages between early childhood development initiatives and health and nutrition; women in development; the girl child; primary education; childhood disability prevention and rehabilitation; and children in especially difficult circumstances require the concerted attention of policy makers, programmers, and practitioners. Some of the proposed programmatic linkages may be described as follows:

Health and nutrition. A simple, direct strategy is to include child development information into the training of medical professionals and paraprofessionals, and into health education initiatives implemented in hospitals, primary health care centres, schools, adult education programmes, and mass media channels. The second edition of Facts for Life, containing this type of information, aims at providing parents and other caregivers with practical, low-cost, and family-based ways of enhancing and protecting their children's normal stages of development.

Women-in-development. Collaboration between those concerned with the healthy growth and development of children and those who are concerned with women's issues, provides a better appreciation of women's multiple responsibilities and contribution to their families, communities, and societies. While challenging the simplistic notions of women as mothers or as workers, a combined programmatic perspective focuses on both child care and health needs. This approach also provides additional insights into existing patterns of distribution of resources within households and, most importantly, it recognizes that women's work choices are almost always conditioned by their need to care for their children.

Available data from both developed and developing countries indicate that participation in early childhood development programmes increases children's enrolment rates, learning progress and performance in the early years of primary schools. These developments appear to reflect a combination of factors such as, improved school readiness related to enhanced health and nutritional conditions and better cognitive skills. Other data suggest that programmes oriented to improving the quality of girls' development, help them catch up to boys in circumstances where their primary school entrance lags. Yet, combining early childhood development programmes with primary school programmes requires a rethinking of the entire programming process. It means bridging the artificial separation that often exists between the years prior to schooling and early primary school children as well as improving schools' readiness for children, rather than thinking that children must necessarily adjust to schools.

What are the Benefits of Early Childhood Development Programmes?

Health and nutritional status

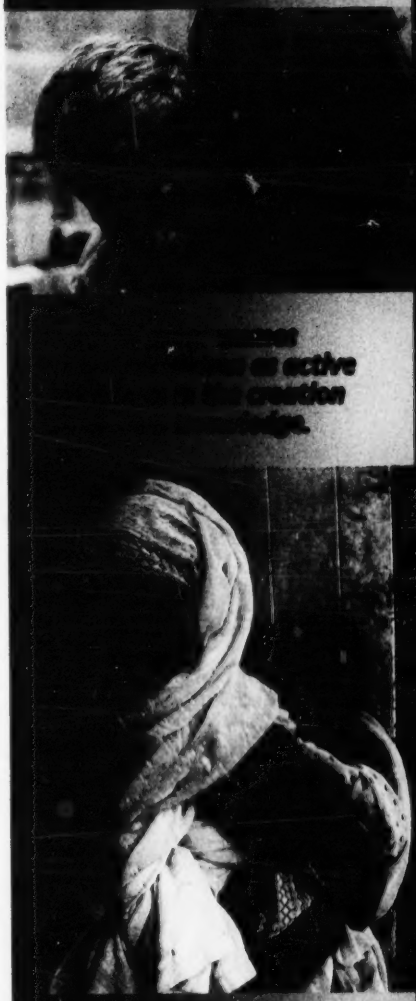
- Increased access to health care services
- Improved health status
- Enhanced nutrition outcomes and practices

Social and emotional development

- Maintained positive maternal attachment
- Increased self-esteem and competence
- Increased achievement, motivation and commitment to school
- Enhanced social skills and behaviour
- Increased social responsiveness and initiative
- Increased interest and participation in classroom activities

School performance

- Increased cognitive skills during early primary school years
- Maintained IQ gains three to four years after the programme ended
- Increased primary school enrolment
- Decreased enrolment in special education programmes
- Decreased repetition rates



Lessons of Success

The expansion of early childhood development programmes over the last decade has been dramatic. Several factors can be identified in the rapid expansion of these initiatives. Successful programmes recognize the simultaneous nature of survival and development, and the interaction among the child's physical, mental, social, and emotional capabilities. Another characteristic defining success is the emphasis placed upon empowering caregivers and communities with the knowledge and skills to provide for the health, nutrition, and developmental needs for their children. Successful programmes recognise that the primary responsibility for the child rests within the home and all efforts to foster development must support, complement, and reinforce the child-rearing responsibilities of the family.

Sustainable programmes are able to identify local patterns and practices of child rearing that for generations have provided culturally appropriate solutions. Once identified, this knowledge is used to inform the design of locally appropriate programmes, integrating, when appropriate, new information and innovative solutions. Successful programmes encourage a level of participation and include children as active participants in the creation of their own knowledge. Moreover, the child's only learning skills are not dependent on the utilisation of expensive equipment and learning tools, but can be developed through the application of low-cost materials combined with a caregiver exposed to a creative training curriculum and motivated by an ongoing system of rewards and incentives.

A Call To Action

In this final decade of the 20th century, we are in an ideal position to make a major and sustained advance in our programming for improved early childhood development. We have sounder knowledge, experience, and technologies to draw upon. Consciousness of the importance of the earliest years of life has grown as evident in the willingness to look beyond survival. That consciousness is indicated by the recent expansion of early childhood programmes, even in a time of economic retrenchment and adjustment. There is indeed hope that "our surviving children" will have an equal opportunity for healthy mental, social, and emotional development. This, then, is a call to national governments and the international community and to proceed with haste towards an enlightened programme of child survival and development. It is also a call to communities and non-governmental agencies to place the child at the center of their efforts as they take advantage of the growing movement towards more democratic societies.

The challenge we face in building strong programmes of child development is at once immediate and long-term. In the remaining years of this century, many pages will be written about preparation for the 21st century. Many assessments will be made, accompanied by dreams for a better future. We are already thinking well into the 21st century as we talk about the young children who will be the dreamers, builders, and leaders of tomorrow. They will be responsible for seeking economic and social justice, for halting the devastation of our environment, and for building a world in which neighbours and nations can live together. It is time to act if we wish to bolster the development of tomorrow's citizenry, with a vision of a more equitable, humane, productive, and peaceful world. It is time to act not only with financial support, but with personal commitment to a fair start for all children. It is with urgency that this call to action is made.

The material contained in this booklet is adapted from *Towards a Comprehensive Strategy for the Development of the Young Child*: An Inter-Agency Policy Review, Education Cluster/Programme Division, UNICEF, New York, March 1993

For further information on Early Childhood Development Programmes please contact:

Child Development Advisor
Education Cluster/Programme Division,
UNICEF (DH-40A)
3 United Nations Plaza
New York, NY 10017

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